

BOOK REVIEW:

Nature's Perfect Food: How Milk Became America's Drink. E. Melanie DuPuis. New York: New York University Press, 2002. 309 pp.

D. Wynne Wright

University of Northern Iowa

Nature's Perfect Food is a book about perfection. What a lofty topic! Who would undertake such an ambitious program of study? Melanie DuPuis has done just that, and while she may not have achieved perfection, the product of her labor, and clearly her passion, is superb. Agricultural sociology is much improved with what will prove to be essential reading for those in the discipline. Rather than gush over what I believe to be one of the most rigorous and highly readable scholarly contributions to agro-food studies in a number of years, let me give you a hint of her accomplishments.

The story of perfection, as DuPuis sees it, is essentially the telling of how milk came to be nature's perfect food. DuPuis is interested in how milk came to be America's drink. How did the United States come to be the number one milk producing and consuming nation on the face of the earth, even though many lack the lactase production enzyme to digest milk? Because milk was socially and politically constructed to be the perfect food for sustaining perfect middle-class (white) bodies. An astute student of history, DuPuis attempts the telling of a "less perfect" story by asking "Why milk?" Primarily through an impressive body of archival research over the past two centuries and her own spatial analysis of fluid milk, cheese, and butter production sites, the author chronicles the process by which milk moved from bacteria-ridden swill milk production (milk from cows fed grain mush runoff from distilleries) to white 'pure' pasteurized 'perfection-in-a-bottle' sure to promote child health to the impish white mustaches sported by celebrities we see in American milk advertisements.

DuPuis begins in Part I by deconstructing the rise of consumption as it emerged along side the industrialization and urbanization of New York City. This section of the book is her strongest. One of DuPuis' primary goals here is to debunk the myth that capitalist interests or advertisers who stood to personally profit from commercial milk created the demand for an industrial milk production system. Instead, ideas and religion take center stage. This story begins in the mid 19th century, when poor milk quality began to be linked with infant mortality and agitators started calling for reform of urban-based swill dairies, privileging "country milk" as a superior product to urban milk. At the same time, new 'research' and rhetoric posited milk as the "perfect food" universally consumed and nutritionally complete as "designed by God" (p. 37). DuPuis, then, artfully demonstrates how "women's bodies were removed from food production" (p. 47) to make way for a bargain to be struck between producers, consumers, and milk processors to forge an industrial (perfect) model of milk production and distribution that would be rational, orderly, sanitized, and regulated by 'experts' in white coats espousing the latest dairy science produced in land grant colleges. Part II focuses on the changes required of this industrial bargain for dairy farmers. Milking parlor modernization, dairy regulation, transportation, and ensuing agrarian insurgency are dealt with in later chapters that lay out the restructuring of the industry as political power gave way from agrarian interests to urban constituencies who demanded quality milk to fuel perfect young bodies.

This is as complete a commodity analysis as I have seen. DuPuis has engaged agricultural sociology literatures with food studies, nutrition, religion, and cultural studies. For those of you looking for her to make a definitive claim on whether milk is good for you – you will be disappointed; she is not interested in this question. For those interested in the recombinant bovine growth hormone controversy – only part of the final chapter is devoted to this topic and she limits her engagement with this subject by examining only rBGH's social context. When reviewing a new book, we all have our preferences that no author can fully cover. I would have liked to have seen the power struggle between consumers, producers, and the state analyzed in more detail. From time to time, I was unclear of DuPuis' conception of the role of the state in dairy governance. She draws on a corporatist framework, but most definitions of corporatism include some degree of organizational power-sharing. Her depiction of consumer authority in New York state implies that, by far, the primary power brokers were urban constituencies who had the influence to promote their consumerist agenda, signaling more of an elite model of power wherein the state is 'captured' by interest groups. I suspect what may account for this seeming contradiction is an example of the evolving dairy state experiencing historical change. To my surprise, there was no link between the long history of dairy farmers insurgency to the social movement's literature. I think the social movement scholarship of Charles Tilly and Doug McAdams' (political process model) could have helped

advance a clearer understanding of this geopolitical transition between consumers and producers as well as given us a clearer picture of the state's role.

For all the recent buzz in the literature about a production/consumption synthesis, DuPuis has done a commendable job of integrating diverse literatures and a mind-boggling amount of historical data that is intricately researched and well written. I suspect that this book will become a watershed volume in much the same way as Friedland's *Manufacturing Green Gold* did more than two decades ago. Not only is this a good read, but it is a pleasure to recommend a book that will be easily assessable to advanced undergraduates and non-academics alike. I feel sure the anti-milk and vegan communities will want to have a look as should others who feel the value of agro-food sociology lies in its ability to understand the interconnectedness of our food relationships.